

Urban Flavor

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By way of introduction:

- The [Fifth Dawn flavor article](#)
- The [Champions of Kamigawa flavor article](#)
- The [Betrayers of Kamigawa flavor article](#)
- The [Saviors of Kamigawa flavor article](#)

Hello again! I'm back to give you some thoughts and observations from one of *Ravnica: City of Guilds'* card names and flavor text writers... Namely me.

Like everyone else who worked on the set, I was champing at the bit for *Ravnica* to go public. It is, honestly, the first set I've worked on as a creative writer (counting *Ninth Edition*, *Ravnica* was my sixth set) in which I stood up and took notice of the cards themselves. I know that sounds odd, but in previous sets I focused primarily on the art, card description, card type, etc. so that I could write submissions that would be good enough to be selected by the Creative Team (Brady Dommermuth, Brandon Bozzi, and Matt Cavotta). It was only once each set released that I started thinking about actually *playing* with the cards.

As I logged card name and flavor text submissions for *Ravnica*, though, I kept thinking "Ooo! I can't wait to build a deck around [Woodwraith Corrupter](#) and [Seedborn Muse](#)!" and "Which guild mechanic do I like the best?" and "How is this set going to draft?" and "Isn't Transmute too powerful?" and "I wonder which guild I'll build decks around first?" and "Too many deck ideas! The pain! Make it stop!" The deckbuilder and player in me just couldn't sit idle for *Ravnica*. I was relieved when [Doug Beyer](#), another creative writer for the set, sent an e-mail to everyone midway through the process saying "I can't wait to play this set!", another first in my experience writing flavor text.



Let me take a moment as a fan and say that I simply love the idea of the ten guilds. The guild structure of *Ravnica* seems to me like a perfect marriage to **Magic's** color pie and central themes. Tying the color pairs to guilds seemed to bring out the best of the designers and developers, and triggered a firestorm of ideas from the Creative Team. I still look at the guilds and marvel at both how cool an idea it is and why it took someone so long to think of it.

Ravnica wasn't all tears of joy, though. The set only features four guilds, but we as creative writers had to intimately know [all ten guilds](#) in order to do our jobs. Mark hadn't told us about [Block design](#) when we kicked off *Ravnica*, but I was suddenly feeling it all the same. After all, how could I write about the Selesya Conclave and its place in the world without first knowing who the Cult of Rakdos were and how they related to the Conclave? Where were the guild territories, and what did the rest of *Ravnica* look like? Which guilds had made alliances in the past and which were eternally in conflict? The basic color pairs and Style Guide offered some help here, but not nearly enough to write a piece of flavor text like:

"The Simic created the cells to preserve their experiments. The Azorius put the cells to use on the guilty."

Which is all to say that my early memories of *Ravnica* are full of excitement and stress. It was by far my favorite idea behind a **Magic** plane ever (I have literally stayed up nights wondering how the ten color pairs could get applied to other fantasy settings), and the cards themselves were cooler than any in recent memory. I have a feeling that *Ravnica* Block will spawn more deck ideas from me than any before it.

At the same time, there was too much to know about this new city-world before jumping in. Our knowledge of the guilds needed to be comprehensive almost from the beginning. Adding an eastern-European flavor to the world only added in the up-front work we all needed to do, since it wasn't a history or mythos as widely known as, say, the Greeks, Egyptians, or Japanese. *Ravnica* was as overwhelming as it was cool.

That said, I think everything worked out great. We creative writers--me, [Doug](#), [Alex Smith](#), [Rei Nakazawa](#), Bruce Cordell, and Rich Amtower--did a lot of extra work to make sure that we tackled this new urban fantasy setting head-on. For the first time, we went beyond the normal [Style Guide](#) and supporting text documents and had a pow-wow chat with the Creative Team. We discussed each guild in turn, asking questions and brainstorming ideas, then turned our attention to the non-guild parts of the world. By the time we entered Namebase to start logging submissions, we as a team had more information at our disposal than any other set I've experienced. I hope you'll agree that the flavor of *Ravnica* turned out as cool as the underlying ideas and mechanics behind it.

Speaking of *Ravnica's* flavor, let's talk specifically about the set's flavor text.

Ten Flavors of Flavor Text

In my *Fifth Dawn* article I outlined a classification system for the general types of flavor text that show up on **Magic** cards. I've found myself as a creative writer thinking about this system a lot, so I've gone back and reworked it a bit to more accurately reflect the sort of stuff I write. For the rest of today, I'll walk you through the different types of flavor text as I see it, highlighting some examples from my own work and the rest of the *Ravnica* set as appropriate. My hope is that you'll find new

appreciation for some of the set's flavor text through this process, and also allow you to ponder which sorts of flavor text you like best. This is a slightly different approach from my previous articles, so pipe up on the Message Boards and let me know what you think.

As far as I can tell, all **Magic** flavor text fits into one of ten categories...

1. The Basic Descriptor

You can't get any more straightforward than the basic descriptor flavor text. Here, the flavor text essentially explains what the card is or what it does. Take the flavor text for [Agrus Kos, Wojek Veteran](#) as an example: *"Liutenant Kos has never met a group of recruits he could not inspire nor a mob he could not quell."* Well, that's just giving voice to the card's mechanics with no attempt at flair or pomp. [Moonlight Bargain](#) (*"At every fifth full moon, the Moon Market convenes to peddle Ravnica's most forbidden wares."*) and [Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi](#) (*"It stands sentinel to Vitu-Ghazi, the great City-Tree and home of the Selesnya Conclave."*) are examples of basic descriptors I wrote as a way of giving some handholds to the world of Ravnica.

Early in my career as a creative writer, I found myself always writing basic descriptor submissions first to get a handle on the card, then expanding into more creative fare with my other submissions. Now I write basic descriptors in my head, rarely logging them in Namebase. This is not to say that basic descriptors are somehow less worthy as flavor text than their brethren, though. In many ways, I think of basic descriptors as the foundation around which the rest of the flavor text is built.

One card that fits this category I want to highlight is [Elves of Deep Shadow](#): *"Cast out of the Conclave generations ago, these elves found a home in the corrupted districts of the Golgari."* You've probably already figured this out, but the flavor text is a direct tribute to *The Dark's* original version of this card. When a card is reprinted, one of the things I almost always do is look at the original to see if there is flavor text I can ape. I think I have at least one tribute per set in *Ravnica* Block, actually.

2. The Narration

I used to think of narration flavor text as encyclopedic entries. I've since come to realize that encyclopedias strive to maintain an objective, neutral voice, which is something we see in basic descriptors. The difference with narration, however, is that it's clear that the voice behind the text places value and opinion on what's being written. Take [Birds of Paradise](#):



Yes, there's basic description going on there, but you can also hear the undertone of social commentary I tried to embed in there. Narration flavor text are the sort of sentences Brady might share with you over lunch as he tried to describe the world of *Ravnica*.

Check out another reprint, [Goblin Spelunkers](#): "*Chimney-sweeps, explorers of abandoned buildings, spire climbers... goblin spelunkers have found countless niches within Ravnica's metropolis.*" What's interesting about it is that it assumes you as a reader know that goblins spelunking has to take on a different meaning when applied to a city-world. The focus is on how goblins--a well-known **Magic** race--have adapted to this different plane. Indeed, that was my approach to the flavor text, looking at the way we viewed the original [Goblin Spelunkers](#) and explaining what the card is doing in a Mountain-less set.

I write a lot of narration. I guess it's my way of sharing in small bits with all of you this neat world I don't have nearly enough space to explain. I want desperately to capture the richness of things like our pow-wow discussion, and narration is often my best means of doing so. It's no surprise, then, that when you look at my credits at the bottom of this article, you'll see a lot of narration. I guess narration is my way to sit down and have lunch with you to explain what I see in each card.

3. The Character Quotation

Of course, one way to make the flavor text's bias explicit is to put words in the mouth of a character. These are bits of dialogue that either illuminate a part of the world, the mechanics on the card, or both. Generally speaking, this flavor text is interesting because it offers lots of different lenses into the world simultaneously.

Take the flavor text for [Mindmoil](#): "*My criticism of the Izzet is that their impulse for learning seems too much like impulse and too little like learning.*" -- Trigori, Azorius senator"

What do we learn here? Well, for one thing there's a bit of insight into the Izzet and their nature, both the love of learning from Blue and the impulsiveness of Red. Because of the tone and commentary, we also get insight into the nature of the haughty White/Blue Azorius. The quote is from a senator, letting you know something about the Azorius place in Ravnican society. It's also from a senator named Trigori, so you've just been introduced to a character (I submitted a lot of flavor text from Trigori for some reason). Finally, there's the hinted-at relationship between the two guilds, finding common ground in the (Blue) love of learning while differing on attitude. That's a lot to glean from one sentence.

I mostly think of character quotations in two different buckets. There are the quotes from known or famous characters, which in *Ravnica* terms means Razia, Szadek, Agrus Kos, and Savra. These are fun voices to use because all of the writers have access to them initially and it's an opportunity to put a stamp on the character's personality. In addition, sometimes a guild leader simply has the most interesting perspective on a matter. Read the flavor text on [Glimpse the Unthinkable](#)--No underling could have said that, because Szadek is the only being with access to all of House Dimir's secrets. The other kind of quotes are those from minor characters made up by the writer. These include your various initiates, nobles, shipwrights, rot farmers, blacksmiths, tavern owners, evangelists, and of course Azorius senators. I'm personally very partial to these less-famous voices, but I'm also aware that they can water down a set considerably. That is, if a set has forty quotations from forty different characters, you've just learned a lot about the world and very little about the individual personalities. So I try hard to find consistent minor characters that other writers are using whenever possible.

I think we did a good job in *Ravnica* limiting the overall number of minor characters and giving them their own recognizable voices. I particularly love Trivaz, the ever-judgmental Izzet mage who brings us such gems as:

- *"If you ask me, those root-lovers value mindless dogma over progress."* ([Seed Spark](#))
- *"A system to direct the flow of Ravnica's entire water supply? Thinking a bit small, aren't we?"* ([Flow of Ideas](#))
- *"The Rakdos know little of technology, but they definitely know how to push buttons."* ([Instill Furor](#))

And the one I wrote: *"Falconry? A fine sport I suppose, if you're attracted to the frailty of birds."* ([Drake Familiar](#))

4. The Unattributed Quotation

Another kind of quotation creeps into **Magic** flavor text. The difference in these kinds of quotes is that they aren't attributed to anyone specific. You know *someone* is talking because the text is in quotation marks, but you have to guess at who. I think the general rule of thumb is that you're supposed to assume it's the character on the card who is speaking. The flavor text for [Caregiver](#) is a fine example:



Honestly, I never used to write this sort of flavor text because it seemed lazy to me. The whole point of quotation, I figured, was to provide an interesting perspective on the world, so you lose a lot of power if you don't know exactly whose perspective is being showcased.

What I've come to realize is that these unattributed quotations can be powerful and clever. What does [Dimir Doppelganger](#)'s flavor text gain by having "-- Golthrash, doppelganger" attached to it? Nothing. In fact it would probably be distracting, especially if no other Golthrash quotes showed up in the set. Everyone knows from the flavor text that it's the doppelganger in the art that is speaking. Another fun feature of unattributed quotes comes from cards like [Remand](#). We all assume that it's whatever off-screen wizard that countered the spell who is speaking, but I wrote it figuring that it could just as easily be something you say to your opponent in a duel. Counter her key spell with [Remand](#), and you can take sadistic glee with "Well, at least all of that arm-waving and arcane babbling you did was impressive." Blue mages... Man, they're annoying.

5. The Real-World Quotation

A final type of quotation that doesn't appear in *Ravnica* (or any recent expert-level set, for that matter) is the real-world, Earth-based quotation. Shakespeare seems to be a popular choice for these quotes, but they run the gamut to include speeches by Douglas MacArthur a la the *Ninth Edition* [Inspirit](#). These literary references are now reserved for Core Sets, where there isn't an attempt at world-building so much as an attempt at getting the overall cool feel of **Magic** across to its players. I never wrote a *Ninth Edition* flavor text article, but I will say that writing flavor text for a set that covers all of **Magic**'s multiverse broadly--but no particular place specifically--is a decidedly odd experience. Finding literary quotes for **Magic** cards is a fun exercise, though. I'm particularly proud to be the person who introduced Ralph Waldo Emerson to **Magic** via [Phantom Warrior](#).

6. The Scrap of History

By far the most prevalent sort of flavor text in the Kamigawa Block was the scrap of history. These pieces of flavor text give you some bit of historical text, a piece of folklore, a saying, or a page from a diary as a window into the world. *Fallen Empires* is also a set dominated by scraps of history in its flavor text. As a creative writing team, we consciously pumped these pieces into Kamigawa to emphasize the “land of ten-thousand legends” sort of vibe in those three sets.

You'll notice the scraps of history decidedly absent from *Ravnica*. We could have spent our time quoting the *Guildpact* and its ratifications, or logs of an urban ranger's wanderings, or maybe bits of Azorius tomes. We didn't. *Ravnica* is meant to have a different feel from Kamigawa. Whereas Kamigawa felt like dipping into a world filled with ancient stories, wars, and heroes, *Ravnica* is meant to feel like a living, breathing cityscape where guild struggles for power are a daily way of life. We aren't highlighting the pivotal moments in Ravnica's history, but instead highlighting Ravnica itself as a dynamic tapestry of intrigue. About the closest thing you'll find in *Ravnica* flavor text to a scrap of history is something that references present-day like “Touched by Moroi.” -undercity slang meaning ‘to grow old.’” or research notes from Simic or Izzet.

7. The Touch of Action

One sort of flavor text that is adept at providing glimpses of a world is flavor text whose primary aim is to show a moment in time. This isn't basic description, nor is it commentary or history. The point here is just to show a cool bit of action and, in so doing, give you a glimpse of life on Ravnica. What does it feel like to have a spell countered? Check out the flavor text of [Convolute](#). Or, for a more subtle look at Ravnican life, you can read [Autochthon Wurm](#)'s flavor text: “At dawn, the trainer woke and began the journey from the wurm's tail to its head. The sun was already setting when he arrived and began the training.”



There are few action-oriented flavor text pieces in *Ravnica*. My guess is that few of these pieces exist in any set. I'm not sure why, except to say that touches of action are probably less interesting than

the various quotations and less informative than basic description or narrative. I also suspect that for these reasons it's less often submitted by creative writers. I know that I write fewer "action shots" than other sorts of flavor text. We writers all want our submissions to be accepted by the Creative Team, and there isn't a lot of precedent for touches of action making a set.

8. The Plot Thread

A virtually extinct kind of flavor text is the sort that gives you direct insight into a set's core plot. Brady has already talked about the [move of Magic from in-depth plot to general world-building](#), so I won't rehash it here. Suffice it to say, the **Magic** novels and flavor text process are fairly distinct right now. Instead of cards like [Abandon Hope](#) ("As Gerrard's form vanished into the maw of trees, Hanna mouthed a silent plea, mourning a crushed dream."), the closest you might find is something like [Rally the Righteous](#) ("Yuri took up the ragged Boros banner, and his brethren, inspired by the act, followed him back into the fight."). The difference of course is that [Abandon Hope](#) is depicting a definite scene in the plotline surrounding the Urza sets, whereas [Rally the Righteous](#) is about a scene made up by the creative writer. As the person who didn't write that bit of flavor text, I have no idea who Yuri is or who he was fighting. Neither does Cory J. Herndon, I'm guessing, the author of the *Ravnica* novel.

9. The Deep Saying/Clever Word-Play

These last two types of flavor text are probably the ones that end up being the most remembered and quoted. In my opinion, they're also the toughest to do well. The first one is the deep saying, a Confucian-like tidbit that could show up in a Ravnican fortune cookie. "*Survivors expect that everyplace a weapon can be hidden holds a weapon,*" from *Grieter's Blade*, is one example. Remember [Matt's waxing enthusiastic](#) about [Rancor's](#) flavor text? That's another good example of the deep saying.

Sometimes the sayings are less heavy-handed and just meant to be a clever play on words. Plays on words are the hallmark of **Magic** flavor text, but these pieces take them center stage. [Junktroller](#) ("One man's trash is another man's troller") or [Leashling](#) ("Constructed of leather and irony.") are cards that more than anything try to be clever. Every **Magic** set is riddled with these sorts of sayings, and I can tell you that the better the card is in Namebase, the more of these kinds of pieces get submitted. Why? Because creative writers want iconic cards to be associated with iconic bits of flavor text. This doesn't mean that good cards only get the deep sayings or plays on words, only that the submissions tend to be slanted in that direction. If we're given very little room (say, one line) to write flavor text, you're also likely to see a lot of these submissions.

I've never met Bob Maher, but I feel connected to him all the same. Not only did I name his [Magic Invitational card](#), but I also got credit for [Dark Confidant's](#) flavor text. For those who are missing the reference, Bob's nickname was "the Great One."

10. The Joke

Finally, the **Magic** flavor text that people either love or hate is the flavor text that attempts above all to be funny. Who can forget [Gorilla Titan](#) or [Furnace Whelp](#)? There's no mystery here, usually no attempt at world-building. The point here is for the quick giggle or maybe even a guffaw. When you see [Vinelasher Kudzu](#) ("It grows to hate you") or [Greater Mossdog](#) ("Man's best fungus"), it's hard not to smile. Probably my favorite funny flavor text in *Ravnica* is from [Hunted Dragon](#).



Get it? Three tokens? Three meals? Naming the tokens after...? Aw, you get it.

For some reason, Green and Red seem to dominate the funny flavor text market, with Goblins being the race that hordes jokes more than any other. Blue gets some snide stuff like [Remand](#), and some very clever word-plays. Black may get some zombie humor now and again, but for the most part both Black and White are too serious for their own good.

As I've said before, I'm not particularly good at joke-laden flavor text. Every now and again I'll bust out with an [Ishi-Ishi, Akki Crackshot](#), but just as often I'll have a set like *Ravnica* completely devoid of smiles. I like to think of myself as a pretty funny fellow, but in flavor text submissions I get way too wrapped up in conveying the world to think about humor. I average only a handful of joke submissions every set, and we creative writers may have only one in a hundred submissions selected. These ten types of flavor text--basic description, narration, character quotes, unattributed quotes, real-world quotes, scraps of history, action shots, plot moments, deep sayings, and jokes--are all tools at my disposal when I sit down to work. The categories aren't perfect or distinct (the flavor text on [Razia's Purification](#) is both basic description and deep saying, depending on how you look at it), and I'm not sure if any of the other creative writers would agree on these categories. For me, however, they represent the conscious choices I make when seeing a new card in Namebase requiring a piece of flavor text. I try to mix my submissions among the different types of text, and I can say definitively that different creative writers specialize in different types of flavor text. As I said earlier, the hope is that walking you through my thinking here helps you see the set--and flavor text in general--in new ways.

A note on names: This article has obviously been much more about flavor text than card names. Maybe for *Guildpact* I'll reverse it and dive into how we creative writers approach the naming of creatures, instants, lands, etc. Certainly there are as many tools regarding card names as flavor text, though perhaps a bit more subtle. It's also interesting to dissect for *Ravnica* when it's okay to use a guild name in the cardname and when it's best to be more descriptive. If you'd like to see the same sort of in-depth look at names as I've done with flavor text today, speak up on the Boards and let me know.

For now, take some time to flip through some of your favorite **Magic** cards. If they have flavor text, read it and try to imagine what the writer was trying to convey and how well you think she or he conveyed it. If you have favorite bits of flavor text, think about if they tend to fall in the same category and what it is you like about that type of flavor text. Moreover, if you hate a particular kind of flavor text, try to articulate why. As a creative writer, it's great fun and very useful to hear your opinions. Speak up on the message boards and you're sure to influence how we approach flavor text in future sets.

Think hard and have fun,

-jms

Jay's full *Ravnica: City of Guilds* credits:

Card names: [Bloodletter Quill](#); [Brightflame](#); [Clinging Darkness](#); [Clutch of the Undercity](#); [Conclave's Blessing](#); [Dark Confidant](#); [Dimir House Guard](#); [Dimir Infiltrator](#); [Dizzy Spell](#); [Drake Familiar](#); [Dream Leash](#); [Ethereal Usher](#); [Flow of Ideas](#); [Golgari Thug](#); [Greater Forgeling](#); [Hunted Phantasm](#); [Moonlight Bargain](#); [Nullmage Shepherd](#); [Oathsworn Giant](#); [Peel from Reality](#); [Remand](#); [Selesnya Sanctuary](#); [Strands of Undeath](#); [Undercity Shade](#); [Woodwraith Strangler](#).
Flavor text: [Agrus Kos](#), [Wojek Veteran](#); [Autochthon Wurm](#); [Barbarian Riftcutter](#); [Birds of Paradise](#); [Blood Funnel](#); [Boros Recruit](#); [Bramble Elemental](#); [Brightflame](#); [Caregiver](#); [Crown of Convergence](#); [Dark Confidant](#); [Devouring Light](#); [Dimir Doppelganger](#); [Dimir Infiltrator](#); [Drake Familiar](#); [Drooling Grootion](#); [Dryad's Caress](#); [Elves of Deep Shadow](#); [Festival of the Guildpact](#); [Glimpse the Unthinkable](#); [Goblin Spelunkers](#); [Grifter's Blade](#); [Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi](#); [Hammerfist Giant](#); [Mindmoil](#); [Moonlight Bargain](#); [Moroi](#); [Nullmage Shepherd](#); [Peel from Reality](#); [Phytohydra](#); [Remand](#); [Seed Spark](#); [Seismic Spike](#); [Surveilling Sprite](#); [Svogthos, the Restless Tomb](#); [Thundersong Trumpeter](#).

